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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 001593

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#)

SUBJECT: MDC HEAD DISMISSES GOZ MOVES; CALLS FOR MORE PRESSURE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER DELL FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND 1.5 (D)

1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador and DCM met September 17 with Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader Morgan Tsvangirai, who said that the GOZ was making cosmetic changes in the face of internal and external pressure but that the situation on the ground had yet to change and until it did the MDC would hold to its threat to boycott the elections. He added that the government remained deeply unpopular, would lose a genuinely free and fair election, and faced the prospect of continuing and potentially more radical opposition should it steal another election. The Ambassador asked what more we could do to help. Tsvangirai said the West needed to keep the pressure on SADC in turn to put pressure on Mugabe. Separately, he confirmed that a verdict in his treason trial was now due October 15, and speculated that he might be found not guilty because the GOZ might seek to avoid controversy. End Summary.

Election Strategy

2. (C) Tsvangirai said the MDC,s approach for the coming elections was to hope for the best but plan for the worst. The party faithful supported the boycott plan as a way to put pressure on the government to make real changes. The dilemma for the MDC remained whether to participate in rigged elections, when doing so would allow the government to claim the elections were fair. On the other hand, any positive changes that the government made at this point would be seen as a win for the MDC, regardless of whether in response to pressure from the South African Development Council (SADC), and if sufficient could lay the ground for MDC participation in the elections.

3. (C) Tsvangirai acknowledged the government had recently made some cosmetic efforts to allow the MDC more space, including allowing three campaign meetings to be held, but he said the reality on the ground was still intimidation and bribery, especially in rural areas. Government militias in the rural areas had taken off their uniforms and blended back into the populace but were still there, observing, and everyone knew who they were)- which was more than enough to intimidate the rural populace. The result was that opposition activity remained muted in these areas. In addition, the regime was buying off the local chiefs, further ensuring that ZANU-PF would sweep the rural areas in next spring,s parliamentary elections. In addition, the GOZ was busy gerrymandering districts, especially in rural areas, to further ensure a ruling party victory.

4. (C) The Ambassador asked whether land reform couldn,t be turned against Mugabe in rural areas by arguing that racial justice aside, it had been botched and had devastated the economy. Without really addressing how the MDC might capitalize on this issue, Tsvangari said land reform was equated in many Zimbabwean,s minds with hunger. In fact, the litany of woes for most Zimbabweans: economic collapse, rising crime, and deteriorating education and health systems, ensured that the elections would be competitive. Even if ZANU-PF won, these issues would not go away and would fuel continuing opposition.

5. (C) Tsvangari said the recent moves by the government reflected their growing confidence. The more confident ZANU-PF became the more space they would allow the MDC in the run-up to the elections. However, the government,s current confidence was misplaced. The regime remained deeply unpopular and would lose a free and fair election. The government might get another rude shock this spring as the results rolled in. The three campaign meetings he had attended, in Bulawayo, Gweru, and Harare, had all been well attended and the participants enthusiastic.

16. (C) Tsvangirai said his deepest concern in the event of another stolen election was that the Zimbabwean people would lose hope that things would ever change and would respond either with massive emigration or rising violence or both. Tsvangirai said he was already having difficulty convincing some in his party to continue non-violent opposition. Some day soon, he might find himself pushed to the side by more radical elements.

SADC Role

17. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. had a difficult line to walk with respect to Zimbabwe. If we pushed too hard on the elections, it could be counter-productive for the MDC since Mugabe was so adroit at turning that support into rhetoric about race and colonialism. He asked what additional steps the U.S. and the West in general could take to put pressure on the regime. Tsvangirai agreed that the role of the U.S., UK, and other non-African countries was tricky and that our approach would have to be crafted carefully to avoid playing into Mugabe's hands. He argued that regional pressure from SADC remained key.

18. (C) The Ambassador said we were unsure whether SADC would really pressure ZANU-PF as there was little evidence to suggest such willingness. Tsvangirai agreed, noting that South African President Mbeki's preferred outcome would be a fairly free election that kept Mugabe and ZANU-PF in power, restored their legitimacy, and muted Western pressure and criticism. Tsvangirai said an MDC delegation was due to travel to South Africa the following week to meet with Mbeki; he promised a readout of the meeting (septel). That said, the goal for both the MDC and the West should be to put the burden on SADC to enforce the principles they agreed to in Mauritius.

Trial Verdict

19. (C) The Ambassador mentioned to Tsvangirai that we had heard from his lawyers (septel) that there would be a verdict in his treason trial on October 15 and asked what outcome he expected. Tsvangirai said the timing of the decision was curious. October 15 was a Friday, which would not leave any time for the government to find him guilty but then grant him clemency before the weekend, the outcome he had expected in August. For that reason, he and his lawyers were beginning to think the court might find him not guilty. He speculated that the GOZ might be hoping to avoid controversy and present a nice face to the outside world.

Comment

110. (C) Tsvangirai confirmed other reports we have heard that the GOZ and ZANU-PF, confident that they've got the election in the bag, may be easing up a bit on the MDC. The motivation is almost certainly to give SADC and other regional leaders enough evidence to back the election results. For his part, Tsvangirai appears confused and somewhat unrealistic in his own analysis. He continues to hope that somehow enough outside pressure can be generated to constrain ZANU-PF's electoral antics even as he admits this is highly unlikely.
Dell